

Throat - A Silent Cry

Zenglin Yang 

Regulations under China's 'Dynamic COVID Policy' between 2021–2023.

1. *Halt non-essential offline social activities during lockdowns to reduce transmission risks.*
2. *Implement sudden lockdowns upon detecting outbreaks without prior notice.*
3. *Residents stay home during lockdowns but can only leave for daily PCR testing.*

Almost every city and every citizen in China had experienced lockdown at least once.

I

Today, I accidentally killed a mosquito. I don't usually hurt any creature, not even the tiniest. But this mosquito was so persistent that it pushed me to my limits. It kept buzzing around me for two whole hours as I tried to sleep. When it landed on my face, I couldn't hold back any longer.

I slapped it, it died, leaving a tiny mark on my hand.

On another day, I saw a pigeon tied up in front of a convenience store. It couldn't fly away, but it wasn't locked in a cage either. The bird just stood there, not even trying to break free. It made me wonder, has it ever attempted to escape?

I also saw a man, drunk by 9 pm. His head was low, as if weighed down by his problems. I guessed that the lockdowns must have played a part in his situation. He seemed to mirror us all in a way, as we were all grappling with the effects of the pandemic, along with the pressures of life.

II

Today, I take part in a strange ritual for the hundredth time – a swab test. This alien thing invading my throat has become an ordinary feeling. But living under the constant shadow of the pandemic is still a challenge. Every visit to the test site increases the sense of dread. There's an electric horn constantly reminding us to "line up, show your health and travel codes." People move forward slowly, like a long line of cattle under the hot sun, waiting their turn to undergo this bleak ritual.

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But this is the way to keep some sense of a normal life, to be a responsible citizen. Still, I can't help but ask: should we have to go through this invasive test three times a week, becoming part of a never-ending cycle of pandemic procedure? My roommate jokes that our throats have grown tough from the countless swabs scraping them.

In reality, I feel a new strength in my throat, a change brought on by these repeated invasions.

Now, I open my mouth wide, not to yell, but to stay quiet.

Waiting for my hundredth test, I realize: life in a pandemic is like enduring a swab test – the swab goes in, twists, and turns, making you want to gag, your eyes tear up, you feel sick. But you can't do anything, you can only watch in silence.

Ah, it's my turn now...

III

Reality has taken a surreal turn. Shanghai, the shining star of China's urban landscape, has been under the grip of an unseen enemy for a month. The city that never sleeps is now unable to provide even basic necessities like food. Many are succumbing to hunger. A rising number of suicides add to the grim reality, victims of desperation,

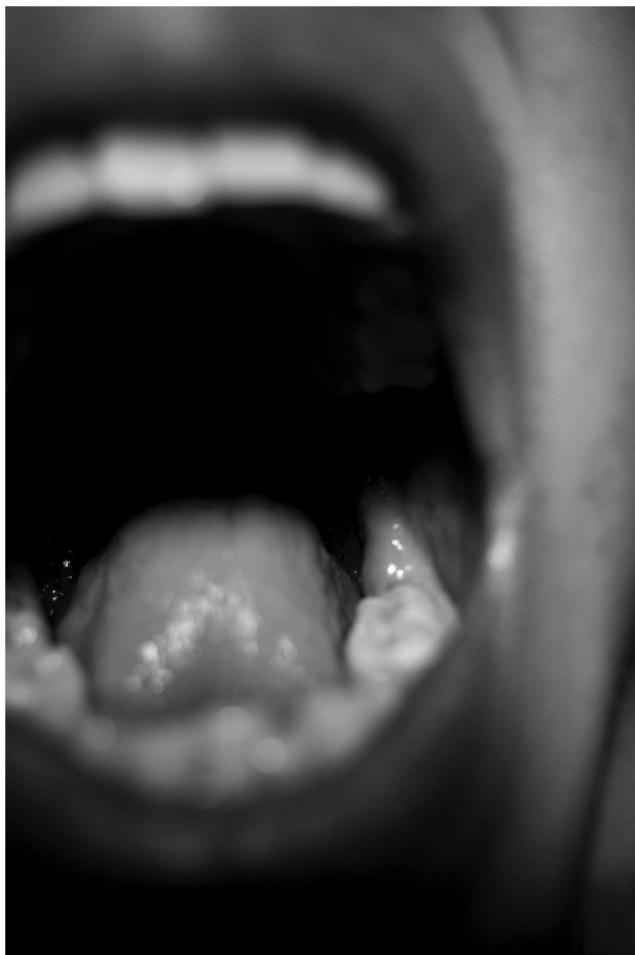


FIGURE 1 A graphical representation of the throat, an embodiment of the endless PCR test and the silent cry.

untreated chronic illnesses, or perhaps, acts of defiance against the harsh COVID restrictions. They are casualties of the pandemic, but none officially die due to COVID.

I, too, am caught in another top-tier city, Shenzhen. I can only step outside after another PCR test. The city has been transformed into a fenced maze, cutting us off from one another, restricting our freedom. My friend and his girlfriend, who live just a street away, are now separated by these impassable barriers. Still, technology offers some relief. The Wi-Fi is strong, enabling video calls. And of course, it allows us to continue our work from home.

From behind these fences, I watch life go on. It has found a way to persist, just with a new rhythm. In 2022, Shenzhen's urban villages, vibrant hubs of life, housed about two-thirds of the city's population. Thirteen million people crammed into about 1700 settlements. The buildings are so close that you can shake hands with your neighbor through the window. Most residents are migrant workers, struggling to balance the demands of the lockdown and their unpaid wages. In contrast, local apartment owners living in million-pound homes find comfort in their golden cages, grateful to a government they believe is protecting them from the virus.



VIDEO 1 An MP4 video demonstrating 20 images from this series, capturing various aspects of the society atmosphere under the zero-covid policy. To view this video in the full-text HTML version of the article, please visit <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/johs.12433>.

Despite everything, Shenzhen remains a symbol of modern socialism.

IV

I admit, I've found an unsettling calm within me. It seems the pandemic has outlasted my resistance and now demands to co-exist. As the world spins on, China's lockdown brings back memories of the Qing Dynasty's self-isolation over two centuries ago. What's the point of this isolation now? Maybe it's a balance between a bit of medical logic and a lot of political maneuvering. But these thoughts border on conspiracy theories. We're supposed to trust and support our star-shaped emblem without question.

A vague yet persistent sense of being watched has started to color my days. My location is always reflected in my travel code, and my life is divided into exact chunks of time - 24, 48, 72 hours. It's a strange new world where nothing lasts more than 72 hours.¹ And if you look up, it feels like something is always watching you. Neon billboards light up the city, their bright lights reflecting off people's faces, illuminating every corner with a cold, impersonal light.

This artificial glow, like the invisible waves of Wi-Fi, touches every part of our lives (FIGURE 1, Video 1). Slideshow is available on this webpage as well: <https://www.zenglin.org/throat>.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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